

Cast of Characters

<u>Moderator:</u>	moderating a panel of experts convened to discuss the latest opinions; occasionally cowed by the task at hand.
<u>Panelist A:</u>	rarely makes sense.
<u>Panelist B:</u>	dignified senior expert, at times nostalgic and stubborn.
<u>Panelist C:</u>	young gun expert; deeply cynical; at odds with Panelist B over the possibility of love.
<u>Steve Martin:</u>	playing the world's greatest neurosurgeon, who has fallen in love with a brain-in-a-vat.
<u>Brain-in-a-vat:</u>	understandably insecure; has a nice body.

I1. A panel of experts.

(Three experts and a moderator sit at a shabbily-lit semi-circular table with microphones. A five-second clip from the 1983 film, *The Man With Two Brains*, plays silently on a loop on a screen behind the panel, the scene where Steve Martin rows a brain-in-a-vat across a pond.)

MODERATOR

To get this panel started, I'd like to ask if there are any thoughts or questions? Good. Everyone complains these days about how the economy is, but it's not that way, it's more like pop songs that want to be your friend, they want to be everyone's friend, it's an entire genre. People just support you. It's not the same way here. We are friends. Friendship is its own reward.

PANELIST A

If I might break in for a moment: my concern with texture began in the bathroom just now, as I was looking at the tiles, which are irregular. I wonder how any of us would know if we like each other. In the scene where Steve Martin gets into a rowboat, he is dressed like a dandy from the nineteenth century, and he rows a human brain out across the pond.

PANELIST C

A dilemma that I've been having lately, what I've been thinking about, almost without ceasing, what has preoccupied my every waking moment, is the number of options.

MODERATOR

Yes, that is an excellent question. That is very insightful, and it's about teleportation. Do you have any symptoms?

PANELIST A

I just keep coming back to that issue you raised earlier, about teleportation. Do you think one can keep falling in love for an entire lifetime without ceasing? Is that really sustainable in any way?

PANELIST C

I think it is.

MODERATOR

The question here is really about whether Steve Martin loves the brain, or if he loves the idea of the brain. Let's get everyone to comment on that briefly.

(CONTINUED)

PANELIST A

All right. I have a comment and a question. First, what is the nature of the abyss? If anyone could address that for me, I'd really appreciate it. And finally, I just wanted to thank all of you for participating in this event with me today.

PANELIST B

I agree with Panelist A in that regard.

PANELIST C

I am going to have to differ with my colleagues here. It's regrettable, since I was under the impression that we had carefully crafted a united front. We would all hang together, as Benjamin Franklin said. There used to be a sense of comradeship.

PANELIST B

I think you're being a little too harsh. Don't rush to judgment here.

PANELIST C

I suspect that at the root of your argument there is a malicious assumption about the uses of history.

MODERATOR

This is becoming strained.

PANELIST A

I have two comments and a question. The earth's magnetic poles will one day be reversed. And I think we are obligated to keep in mind that our country is at war. In light of this fact, how would you, Panelist C, have access to any of Steve Martin's thoughts or emotions as he sits in the rowboat with the human brain?

PANELIST C

That is patently false. I'm having trouble engaging you here, Panelist A, because I think there may be some basic differences in terminology. When you use the term "teleportation," could you clarify what exactly you mean? Are you talking about field notes, or something published in an accredited journal?

PANELIST A

Are you implying that my credentials are false?

PANELIST C

All of us have meaningless credentials. That's not the issue here.

(CONTINUED)

MODERATOR

I really believe in what Dr. Franklin said, about the rising rather than the setting sun.

PANELIST C

That is so trite.

PANELIST B

Do you think that if we keep ignoring this, it will just go away? We have turned our collective backs on the problem for too long. Nobody used to teach about teleportation. It was a secret word that we whispered as we passed each other in hallways. I first encountered it sewn into the lining of a new Australian wool jacket.

PANELIST C

Panelist B, you are becoming sentimental. Let's keep in mind that we all have tenure. There is nothing to stop you from throwing yourself on the funeral pyre.

MODERATOR

My feelings are hurt at this point. There is hoping, and then there is hoping in vain. What do you want out of me? Could each of you address that, please, and add a concluding remark, as our time is almost up.

PANELIST A

I have nothing to say to you. The most important thing you can do is keep multiplying. If you can't see the tenderness that is there, plainly there, on Steve Martin's face, then I think you are less than human.

PANELIST B

In the final evaluation, I would obviously take the stupid woman with the nice body.

PANELIST C

I have one comment, which is that the calculus of risk sometimes wakes me in the middle of the night. I lie there in a cold sweat, thinking about the number of options. Even bracketing off whether Steve Martin truly loves the brain, how many kinds of delusional love are there? How many symptoms of friendship are there? For instance, I wouldn't die for anyone because that is simply not practical.

2. A rowboat.

(Steve Martin and the brain-in-a-vat sit in a rowboat, which Steve Martin is rowing across a bucolic pond. He is wearing a white suit and a straw hat. The brain is also wearing a hat.)

(CONTINUED)

STEVE MARTIN

I have played the cards that life has dealt me. I have filled up the empty spaces.

BRAIN

That's true. Those cards have not always been fair or correct. You hold your cards close to the vest.

STEVE MARTIN

It's because the minds of others are inscrutable.

BRAIN

(pause)

That's true.

STEVE MARTIN

Your voice is faint. I can barely hear you, but I know you have a nice body. That may be all I ever know about you.

BRAIN

What can I know about you?

STEVE MARTIN

That's a good question. I wish I had the answers, I really do. Let me tell you, I was afraid for a long time of falling asleep and waking up as a different person. In this anxious fantasy, I would wake up and understand that I had become a different person, but I could only think and act as that new person although I longed for my old self. Fear kept me awake. And then I discovered the brain, the thing that is constantly in us, making us who we are.

BRAIN

Have you seen your brain?

STEVE MARTIN

Of course, I'm an elite neurosurgeon. I find my brain agreeable.

BRAIN

Do you think it will ever change?

STEVE MARTIN

Of course not. The only thing that will happen is this. My imaging software will become more advanced, distinguishing ever more discrete functional units, revealing neural networks and memory systems that I have always known are there.

BRAIN

Will I ever change?

3. The same rowboat returned to its starting position.

(Steve Martin rows the brain-in-a-vat across the pond. They start their dialog again as if from the beginning.)

STEVE MARTIN

I have juiced the lemons that life has thrown at me. I have filled in the empty space.

BRAIN

Tell me, do you have any friends?

STEVE MARTIN

I'm a very busy world-class neurosurgeon. Of course I don't have any friends. Sometimes I lose a patient and this is something that I'd have to tell my friends about if I had any.

BRAIN

You wouldn't necessarily have to tell them. You could just say you were having a bad day, and leave it at that.

STEVE MARTIN

They can read your mind. It's no use with friends.

BRAIN

I can't read your mind.

(silence)

STEVE MARTIN

Do you know how many options you have?

BRAIN

No.

STEVE MARTIN

Do you want to know? Technically it's a violation of HIPAA regulations, but I'll tell you if you want to know.

BRAIN

I think I'd rather not.

STEVE MARTIN

You have an infinite number of options. You could be any currently living person on the face of this earth, provided that I can find them and saw their skull open. You have six billion options at least. You could probably also be any primate.

(CONTINUED)

BRAIN

(frustrated)

Isn't that a gross fallacy?

STEVE MARTIN

I don't know. From my perspective as an elite neurosurgeon and an unhappily-married man, the possibility of radical technologically-enabled freedom to sculpt one's identity from whole cloth is both professionally and personally all I have ever desired.

BRAIN

But this is me we're talking about.

STEVE MARTIN

But I'm your friend. I only want for you what I would want for myself.

BRAIN

Don't you love me?

(pause)

STEVE MARTIN

I love you.

4. The same rowboat returned to its starting position.

(The rowboat seems to be taking on water as the scene progresses; this is not remarked upon.)

STEVE MARTIN

(triumphantly)

I have caulked the emptiness and zested the lemon peel of life.

BRAIN

I can't remember what lemons taste like.

STEVE MARTIN

(aside)

This can be very draining for me sometimes.

BRAIN

I don't remember what running feels like. I can't remember the feeling of handcuffs snapping shut around my wrists. I don't remember swallowing food down the wrong pipe and having to cough disruptively.

(CONTINUED)

STEVE MARTIN

Do you want information from me, or do you want to be my friend?

BRAIN

I've fallen in love with you. That's my only hope, clinically.

STEVE MARTIN

How many times have you fallen in love with a dashing scientist who was also your last clinical hope?

BRAIN

Can't remember.

STEVE MARTIN

Could you string yourself along like that forever?

BRAIN

Eventually the premise would wear thin and my contract would fail to be renewed.

STEVE MARTIN

What would become of you then?

BRAIN

Don't you love me?

STEVE MARTIN

(ominously)

We are using each other. I have a lot of friends in jail. You're just getting to know me in this scene.

BRAIN

(dejected)

There are people in the world who I would die for. I mean, I haven't done the math on this, but I would probably die to save the President, if his assassination meant the onset of nuclear war and the end of life on earth. I guess these are all just thought experiments. I would die to save someone I loved.

STEVE MARTIN

I have definitely let myself be used in the past. I know how that feels.

BRAIN

Maybe you don't understand.

(CONTINUED)

STEVE MARTIN

It's not very complicated. I think you underestimate me a great deal. I am prepared to give you my body or an equivalent body. It's just that this tires me sometimes, thinking about how much I've promised to you.

BRAIN

I'm sorry that you're tired. But I don't think you understand. I don't need anything from you, I'm here to give myself to you. If we both give ourselves to each other there will be only one of us, or a monstrosity, or an abstract simultaneous presence. Someone has to be cruel to uphold the traditional way of doing things.

STEVE MARTIN

You're asking me to be cruel to you?

BRAIN

Doesn't it make sense that the hardest thing would be required? And that it means never changing anything at all? One or another of those thunderstorms.

STEVE MARTIN

You are not as qualified as you could be and this is probably your deepest flaw. What do you know about experience? What are your credentials? I'm beginning to think you might not even have a nice body.

BRAIN

(urgently)

I do.

END